The Swamp Secret

CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

"Dick Brayton, when you found that writing on the old tree, you found something that referred, in some way, to what was done last night," he told himself. "I'm sure of it," he added, aloud.

"Did you speak to me?" asked the man.

"No," answered Dick, rousing himself from the abstraction into which his train of thought had thrown him. "About what time do you think the horses were stolen?"

"Wall, we don't say right out that we think they was stole," answered the man. "But I allow it kin' o' looks that a way. Whether they were stole or got out o' their own accord, it must ha' happened summers 'twixt ten an' daylight. They was there, all right, when ol' man Averill went to bed, an' they was missin' when he got up this mornin'. That's 'bout all I can tell ye, 'cept the fence that they must 'a' got out through, or b'en helped through, was a good one, an' the hosses never was knowed to be onruly, an' we don't see how they come to take it intu their heads to git breachy all to oñet. The fact is, we don't b'leeve they ever got out o' the field 'thout help; but b'leevin' ain't knowin', you know."

"Have you found any track of them yet?" asked Dick.

"Nothin', 'cept as fur as the road," was the reply. "It rained about daylight—a reg'lar, right-smart leetle pour-down while it lasted—an' you can't track nothin' this mornin', on that account, only here an' there, where the ground's so hard it don't wash easy."

"Have you any suspicions of who could have taken them?"

"No more'n the man in the moon," was the reply. "They're gone, an' that's all I can tell ye. I've met nigh on to a dozen men this mornin', and none of 'em has seen hide or hair o' the critters. It's mighty queer. Seems jest as ef the airth had opened an' swallered 'em."

"It is queer," said Dick. "Do you want help in looking for them?"

"Yes, all we can git," was the answer. "Averill, he's a poor man, an' can't afford to lose his team. Mebbe we're worryin' 'thout any reason, an 'they'll turn up summers 'round the kentry; but I allow it look's ef they was took. Anyhow, 'tain't no more'n fair an' neighborly fer us to turn out an' help him hunt fer 'em."

"Of course, we'll all help," said Dick. "Is there to be an organized search, or is every one to work independently?"

"Wall, you see, we haint got so fur as that yit," was the reply. "We hain't knowed what to do, 'cause we hain't knowed what to think. They're to meet at Averill's at noon or thereabout and fix up some plan, ef the horses don't turn up afore that time."

Fifteen minutes later, Dick, Mr. Boone and the messenger from Averill's rode away together.

As they came opposite Mr. Porter's they saw Wayne sitting in the doorway, with a singing book in his hand, humming over the tunes to be sung at the next session of the singing school.

"Hello!" called out Dick to Samanthy, who was standing at the kitchen window, evidently wondering about the cavalcade she beheld. "Did you know there were horse thieves about this morning?"

He watched Wayne as he asked the question to see what effect the words had on him.

The singing teacher looked up from his book for a moment as indifferently as he might at the sound of any voice heard unexpectedly, but either did not understand what had been said or felt no interest in it, for when he saw who the speaker was, he dropped his eyes upon his book again and went on with his singing.

"You don't say!" cried Samanthy, coming to the door, all excitement in a moment. "Whose hosses have b'en took?"

"Averill's, near Deer Creek," answered Dick, with his eyes on Wayne's face. But its quiet, unconcerned look baffled him.

"Wall, I mus' say that's comin' purty clus home," remarked Samanthy. "I wouldn't wonder a bit ef they got 'round these diggin's 'fore long. Hope they'll ketch 'em an' string 'em up."

"Tell Ezra," called out Mr. Boone. "Mebbe he'll want to turn out and help hunt."

"I will so," answered Samanthy.

Then the party rode off. It was joined by several others before they reached Averill's, where they found quite a crowd assembled. Old men, young men and boys were there. It seemed as if all the male portion of the community had turned out to help hunt horse thieves. The excitement was intense.

Each person had a theory of his own to offer. Each person also had a plan of his own to propose and advocate respecting the search. The consequence was that it was nearly two o'clock before they began to do anything.

"You didn't see or hear nothin' o' strangers las' night, did ye?" asked Bill Green of Dick as they stood together, waiting for some plan of action to be decided on.

"No. How would I be likely to see anything of them?" asked Dick. "'Tisn't likely they came around Mr. Boone's."

"I didn't s'pose they did come 'round Mr. Boone's," responded Bill. "But you wa'n't there all the time. I didn't know but you might ha' heerd suthin' when you was down this way last night."

"Aren't you mistaken about my being down this way?" asked Dick.

"No, I hain't," answered Bill, stoutly, "I kind o' reckon that you s'picioned I see ye. Was you out sparkin'?"

Bill asked his question at random. When he asked it, Dick thought of the idea he had had of calling on Rhoda, and taking that knowledge of his intention into consideration, along with the fact of his having accompanied her home several times from singing school, on the strength of which occurrence Bill Green had prophesied a match, it seemed to him that Bill must, in some way, have an inkling of what his intentions of the night before had been, and he could not keep down the color from his face. He saw that Bill's suspicions were aroused in some vague way, and, disliking the fellow as he did, that made him indignant, and he turned away with the remark that he didn't know that it was anybody's business where he had been or what his business was. A most unfortunate remark to make, under the circumstances, as he had to admit, later.

"It looks mighty curi's to me," Bill said to the men who had been standing by, listening to the conversation. "He's jes' as good as denied bein' out las' night, when I tackled him about it. Ye heerd what he said about it, I reckon. Now I'm willin' to swear on a stack o' Bibles big's a meetin' house that he went by our house about two o'clock, fer I was up a-drivin' the cow out o' the gardin, an' I see a man a-skulkin' along the road, an' when he see me he kind o' sheered off into the shadder, as ef he didn't want to be seen. But I see him, fer all that, jest as plain's day, an' it was Dick Brayton, an' he knows it. S'posen we find out whether he was to anybody's house las' night. Jest you make inquiries, kind o' sly, so's t' not git him to mistrustin' anything. Ef he was anywhere I'd like to know it. Ef he wa'n't I'd like to know where he'd be'n to at that time o' night. He tried to bamboozle me by pretendin' I was mistaken. But I tell ye I wasn't. When I see a man I know him, and he can't cram the con-tra-ry down my throat! No, sirree, not by a goldarn sight. My name's Bill Green, an' I'm willin' to back up what Bill Green says, any day. Yes, sir: I be, an' ye can bet yer bottom dollar on't, ef ye want to," and by way of making the assertion more emphatic Bill expectorated a great mouthful of tobacco juice at the head of an unlucky chicken which happened to pass.

It takes but little to arouse a person's curiosity and excite suspicion. There were plenty who were willing and ready to inquire if Dick Brayton had been at any one's house on Wednesday evening. No one had seen him after singing school, except Bill Green.

But the excitement of the search made everything else secondary for the time, and Bill let the ball he had set rolling rest for the present; but he had not got through with it by any means. He would set it in motion again, if necessary, and he always felt it obligatory upon him to do anything that would annoy a person against whom he had a grudge.

The search began.

The woods were scoured in all directions.

Everything was done that men who have no clue to work from could do.

For two days the search was kept up faithfully. But not a trace was found of horses or horse thieves. Everybody was completely mystified. It seemed very much, as the man who spread the news of the theft had said, as if the earth had opened and swallowed them up.

"It's no use to look longer," said Averill, on the evening of the second day. "We've done all we could. We've be'n everywhere, 'ceptin' in the Big Swamp, an' there hain't no use o' goin' there, 'cause a man can't travel in it, much less a hoss. So we know they can't be there, 'thout takin' the trouble to look. We'll have to give it up as a bad job, boys," he added with a little quaver in his voice. To lose one's horses in those days was to lose the greater share of one's dependence. "I'm much obleeged to ye fer yer kindness, an' I hope tu hev a chance tu pay ye back, some day, but not in the same way."

So the search ended and nothing had been accomplished by it.

"I don't understand about Dick Brayton's tryin' to lie out o' bein' off summers that night," said Bill Green to his particular cronies. "I'm a-goin' to look inter the matter a leetle. Mebbe it's all right, but what puzzles me is, why sh'd he try to deny it when he knows I see him?"

Of course, this hint of Bill's that there was something wrong was a subject of frequent conversation among his friends after that, and it was but a short time before Dick was under a suspicion which was to culminate in a charge of villainy against him.

CHAPTER XI.

A day or two went by.

The excitement began to lull a little.

But there was no danger of its dying out for a long time to come, even if nothing more of the kind which had aroused it were to happen, for the recollection of a horse stealing transaction was to the early settlers what our late war is to those who took part in it—something to be talked over and wondered about every time two or three interested neighbors got together.

Monday morning Dick happened to be wanting an iron of some sort to make a repair on his plow. Not finding one about Mr. Boone's house or barn, he went over to Mr. Porter's to see if he could find what he wanted there.

Samanthy was in the front yard, giving little vicious dabs at a coat which was hanging on the clothes line. She had a basin of soapsuds on a block of wood beside her, and with this solution, applied with a rag, she was endeavoring to accomplish something with the garment before her.

"Have you taken to cleaning old clothes?" asked Dick, coming up behind her, unobserved.

Samanthy gave a little piping cry, that was first cousin to a fashionable young lady's shriek, and nearly jumped out of her shoes, she was so startled.

"Land o' goodness, how you scairt me!" she cried. "I didn't know as there was a man anywheres 'round the diggin's."

"I don't believe you're as much afraid of the men as you'd like to make me think you are," laughed Dick. "I'd like to know what you're doing."

"I'm cleanin' up that feller's coat," answered Samanthy, with a vicious emphasis on "that feller" and an accompanying vicious twitch of the garment belonging to him.

"Can't he clean his own clothes?" asked Dick, eying the coat closely. "Is he so busy he can't find time to do it himself?"

"I s'pose so," answered Samanthy, spitefully. "Ef he had a couple more gals to make fools of, we'd hev to wait on him the whole endurin' time."

"Meaning Nannie and——"

"An' Rhody," said Samanthy, finishing the sentence for Dick. "Oh, I ain't blind by no means! Bless ye, I've seen how things was a-goin' fer a good spell back, an' I jest keep a-puttin' in my say whenever I git a chance, an' you jest mark my words an' see if that feller don't have a fallin'-out with both o' them gals afore long. I've talked to Nancy, an' I've talked to Rhody, an' 'twon't be sich a great while afore I git 'em worked up so't they'll give Mr. Singin' Teacher to understand that he can't palaver 'round 'em both in the way he's doin' now. Ye see, the way 'tis now, he's a makin' Rhody b'leeve she's playin' fust fiddle when he's with her, an' when he's with Nancy, why, she's the one. Gals don't put up with the idee o' playin' second fiddle for nobody, so there's a-goin' to be the biggest kind of a rumpus afore a great spell, an' I ain't a mite ashamed to own up that I'm a-doin' all I can to help it along. Consarn his picter, I don't like him, an' never did. He was a-sayin' suthin' he thought awful sharp about ol' maids, t'other day, but I didn't let on I heerd him, though I knew he was a-sayin' it fer my 'special benefit, but, thinks I, jest you wait an' see if there hain't one ol' maid that's enough fer ye, when she gits a chance to do suthin'."

"I have been considerably worried on Rhoda's account," said Dick. "Having no mother to advise her, he has a greater chance to influence her than Nannie. And I think, too, that Rhoda cares more for him than Nannie does."

"I guess you're right about that," responded Samanthy, "but ye needn't worry. Rhody's smart enough to look out for herself, I reckon, though she's kind o' soft about some things, like 'most all gals."

"Well, I hope so," said Dick, rather skeptically, however. "But it seems to me that that coat must be uncommonly dirty, judging from the amount of labor you are laying out on it."

"'Tain't exactly dirt," explained Samanthy. "It's pitch. He's daubed one sleeve clear up to the elbow."

"I'd like to know where he's been to get pitch on his clothes?" wondered Dick. "There isn't a pine tree anywhere about the neighborhood, though there may be some small ones near the Big Swamp."

"I dunno where he got it from, but it's there, sure enough," responded Samanthy. "He come a-fetchin' out the coat a little spell ago as pomp'us as a kurnel o' m'lishy, trainin' day, an' sez he: 'I want this cleaned,' as ef I was obleeged to trot 'round when he told me to. 'I'll give you a quarter ef you'll clean it,' says he, a-seein' that I was goin' to git buffy 'bout bein' ordered 'round. That made a difference. I couldn't airn a quarter any quicker, so I said I'd do it, an' that's what I'm up to now."

"Samanthy," said Dick, in a low and mysterious whisper. "I believe I could tell where that pitch came from."

"Why—what d'ye mean?" asked Samanthy, her woman's curiosity all aroused in an instant by the air of mystery about Dick's words and manner.

"I mean just this: That I believe Wayne's a rascal," answered Dick. "I believe he could tell us who stole those horses if he saw fit to."

"Good land o' deliverance!" cried Samanthy. "Hev you any idee who under the sun an' airth it was? Hey?"

"I have," answered Dick. "But I don't want to say anything more now. Perhaps I ought not to have said as much as I have, but I know you can keep things to yourself. I haven't told you anything that amounts to much, but it may set you to thinking, and if you keep your eyes and ears open you may see and hear something that will help to straighten things out. I think, as I said, that I know where that pitch came from, and to-night I'm going to find out whether I am right or wrong about it. If I am, I shall feel sure that I know who one of the men is that helped to steal Averill's horses."

"Do you s'picion him?" asked Samanthy, in a whisper, with a furtive look about them, as if she half expected to find Mr. Wayne listening to their conversation.

"Yes, I do," answered Dick. "But I wasn't going to say anything more about it, was I? I'll tell you more about what I think before long. In the meantime keep what I've hinted to yourself, Samanthy."

"I will so," responded Samanthy. "But how d'ye come to mistrust——"

But Dick was resolute in his determination to say no more about the matter then.

"Wait a while," he said, and then went back to his work.

"Fer goodness' sake!" Samanthy kept saying to herself, by spells, all day. "I'd like to know if it can be so! The idee! A hoss thief in the house! My goodness!"

CHAPTER XII.

It was after nine o'clock, and the singing class was in the middle of a new tune, when Bill Green, who was sitting by the window of the school house, looked out and saw a man going down the path leading to the crossroads from Mr. Boone's.

"'Pears to me that looks like Dick Brayton," thought Bill. "Wonder what he's skulkin' 'round a'ter now?"

Dick had stopped in the path and was listening to the singing. As Bill watched him from the window he started on.

"He's goin' from home," said Bill to himself. "I'm a-goin' to foller him an' see where he goes this time—or my name ain't Bill Green!"

He contrived to slip out of the school house without being observed and crept cautiously along the path toward the place where he had seen Dick last. It was a cloudy night and one could see but a little way into the gloom, except when the clouds broke away for a moment and let the moon shine through.

There had been one of these breaks in the clouds when Dick paused to listen, and Bill, looking out just at that time, had had no trouble in recognizing him. His curiosity was excited at once when he saw Dick going away from Mr. Boone's. But one settler lived in that direction, a German, unable to talk a dozen words of English, and with him Dick would be unlikely to have any business.

Bill had been keenly suspicious of Dick ever since the conversation which took place at Averill's on the first day of the search, and it was therefore quite natural, and but the work of a moment, for him to decide to play the spy.

Dick had started for the cottonwood tree, on which he expected to find something new, by a route somewhat more roundabout than the one he had taken on the day of the discovery of the writing, but part of the way would run on higher ground, where the underbrush was thinner, and traveling in a cloudy night would thus be rendered easier.

Bill Green crept along the road swiftly in shadow till he could faintly discern Dick's figure ahead. Then he slackened his pace and kept along at a safe distance behind.

About a mile from the school house Dick struck off into the woods.

Bill followed him with all the eagerness of a bloodhound on the scent of a fleeing fugitive.

"This is gettin' to be mighty excitin'," whispered Bill to himself. "I wonder what it's goin' to amount to?"

Two or three drops of cold perspiration broke out on Bill's forehead as the thought of horse thieves came into his mind. At heart he was a coward. Horse thieves stood to him for all that was desperate and dangerous. To be near them was to be on the brink of a precipice.

He fully realized the awful danger he might be in should Dick prove to be one of those dare-devil characters and happen to discover him. But he wasn't going to back out now. He hated Dick too much to give up while there was a chance of discovering something against him.

(To be continued.)

Frank Stockton's New Home.

"Claymont," Frank Stockton's new home, is the fulfillment of his ideal: "a garden spot, shut in from the world amid the hills of the beautiful and historic valley of the Shenandoah, a few miles distant from quaint old Charlestown, in West Virginia," writes Clifford Howard in the Ladies' Home Journal. "A hundred and fifty acres of forest, fields and orchards; of widespreading lawns and terraced gardens, and in their midst a stately mansion of Colonial architecture. Standing on a gentle eminence, the house overlooks the landscape, in which few other dwellings are visible, and no highway nor road passes within sight of it. It stands back more than three-quarters of a mile from the entrance to the grounds, and is reached by a winding driveway through a wood of oak and tangled vines, with here and there a mass of rock or some boulder, adding to the picture of romantic wildness."

Here is something that may interest women who are looking for husbands: A man hates mightily to marry an entire family.

The growing Cook County city of

BLUE ISLAND, ILLINOIS,

Is just taking another stride in advance. Under Mayor Jacob F. Rehm's vigorous and popular administration, the prosperous old suburban community will shortly possess a noble hillside park along Burr Oak avenue. As in the case of Chicago and Lincoln Park, an ancient cemetery, laid out over half a century ago, will become the new recreation place for the living. Mayor Rehm, on entering upon his sixth term, emphasized his position that no more burials should take place there, since the grounds were overcrowded, and now—so actively are the Mount Greenwood authorities co-operating—the ashes of over half the 800 forefathers interred in the old graveyard have already been reverently transferred to magnificent Mount Greenwood. Willis N. Rudd, superintendent of Mount Greenwood, continues very energetic in the removals, and, as Mount Greenwood deeds to the municipality the old lots taken in part exchange for the new, a beautiful public park of the size of a large block will soon be added to Blue Island's many attractions.